

Independent Schools (Public Schools)

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Citizens should have the right to set up alternative educational institutions to those provided by the state.

European Law

Private schools are not incidental to the class system. They are the very cement that divides British society. **Neil Kinnock, Leader of the Labour Party, 1992**

Why the Debate?

One side argues that these schools provide....



- [They provide greater freedom of choice.
- [Such schools as Eton and Harrow are a precious part of the national heritage and culture.
- [As they are not constrained by the National Curriculum, they can experiment with progressive teaching. A good example of this is Summerhill School.
- [They contribute to diversity in the education system.

But...

- ✗ Those who form private schools and who govern may not fully concern themselves with 93% of the population as their children continue to be educated in private schools.
- ✗ Comprehensive schools will not be truly comprehensive and non-selective until 100% of pupils attend them.
- ✗ Fee-paying schools split British Society into two; those who can afford them and those who cannot. Thus the existence of private schools is divisive.
- ✗ They are unfair in that they provide an education with small class sizes on the basis of ability to pay rather than talent.
- ✗ In a society that claims to be meritocratic, the existence of public schools gives an advantage to a small group in society.

What is an Independent School?

A **small proportion** of the children attend schools in which their parents **pay for**, known as '**independent**' because they exist outside state education provision. For example, they do not have to teach the 'National Curriculum', nor make their students sit Standard Attainment Tests (SATS). There are 2,000 of them, ranging from **small private day schools** catering for primary age children to '**progressive**' schools, established by individuals who wish to practice **radical educational ideas**, to the old and famous '**public**' schools such as Eton and Harrow, attended by **aristocracy** i.e. Prince William attends Eton, and **wealthy members of society**.

What Does the Government Do to Help Public Schools?

Independent schools are not really independent from the state at all. They depend on their financial existence on a **legal anomaly**, which allows them to **register as charities**, just like OXFAM or the RSPCA. This gives them **tax relief** on their **income** and a **reduction on rates**. The schools also receive **allowances** to educate the children of members of the **armed forces** and **government employees** who work abroad. The taxpayer subsidizes the private sector to the tune of **over 500 million pounds a year**.

There are many poor quality schools in the private sector of education but the top few provide excellent but expensive education.



Exercise One

Fact or Fiction?

Fact or Fiction answer whether you think the following statements are true or false.

1. There are 2,287 private schools in the UK, in 1991.
2. These schools educate 9% of the school population.
3. 19.6% of pupils attend a private school to do A levels.
4. 53% and 47% are male and female respectively in private schools.
5. Public schools educate just 1% of the school population.
6. In 1995 Rugby appointed its first female head girl.
7. To send your child to Eton, you must 'register them at birth', and then be prepared to pay £13,000 per annum in school fees for the privilege of sending them there.
8. About 50% of home undergraduate places are taken by those from public schools at the top Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.
9. Independent schools spend two third more on each pupil than state schools.
10. Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Mel Smith, Griff Reece-Jones, and Noel Edmonds all went to public schools.

Exercise Two

Match the following percentages with the likelihood of them being in the 'Great professions'. How would we expect things to change in the future?

1. 85% (1990)
2. 86.1%
3. 70%(1984)
4. 88.9% (1971)
5. 84%
6. 49%(1984)

Match the above to the following professions....

1. Navy officer
2. Army officer
3. Top Civil Servants
4. Conservative Cabinet
5. Top Judiciary
6. Bank Directors

Who attends them? (The Middle Classes)

Most children at private schools are from **wealthy homes**. At the 250 most prestigious schools, which belong to an organization called The Headmasters Conference, **over 90%** of the pupils come from the **professional** and **managerial classes** and above (See Heath, Ridge and Halsey).

How Do Public Schools Help the Children Concerned: What jobs do they get?

The products of private education achieve **occupational success**. Halsey et al found that **the type of school attended** was one of the **main factors** for **occupational success**. Particularly in **business** and **managerial occupations**, public school boys emerged on top. They were also **far more likely** to acquire **educational qualifications**, mainly because private schools are dedicated to **intensive examination preparation**, and have on average 14 pupils per class. In all the top positions of society - the legal profession, civil service, armed forces, medical profession, industry and government - the majority went to independent schools.

What has been Happening Recently? The Assisted Places Scheme

Private education **appears to be expanding**. A big growth occurred when the Labour government of 1974-9 **abolished** the **Direct Grant**, the financial assistance which enabled some private grammar schools to provide a proportion of their places free to those who passed an entrance examination. The Conservative government, which replaced the Labour party in 1979 claiming to assist the low-income parents of bright working class children, established the **Assisted Places Scheme**. A central fund was set up from which local authorities could claim, to pay the fees of a few children whose parents income was below £6,401, to attend private schools, in fact, very few of the families who have taken advantage of this scheme were from the working classes.

The Case for Independent Schools ('short but sweet')

The defender of private education point to **smaller class sizes** and **better facilities** of the public schools than those found in the state sector. Many **teachers** are also **paid more**, **examination results** are often **better**, and **pupils** have a much **higher chance of getting to university**. Many defend private education on the grounds that the parents **should have the right to spend their money as they see fit**, and improve their children's life chances is a sensible way of doing this, if not a fair way. Moreover, resources and facilities are better than in some state schools. Often parental input is high in terms of fees, expectations and support. Whilst many independent schools have an academic culture, in which academic achievement is emphasised and examination results are extremely good. Pupils are said to be highly motivated and often go on to top universities such as Oxford and Cambridge.

The Case Against

Many remain opposed to private education arguing that **most** people **do not have the money** to purchase a private education for their children, and it is **wrong** that people of the **well-off** should be given **advantages** in education than the poor.

Moreover, as I have already explained the schools **receive money from the taxpayer**, despite the fact **that few taxpayers can afford this particular public good**. The **taxpayer**, also pays for **training** the **teachers**, as many come out of university, gain experience in state schools then go to the private sector, often attracted by the higher wages, and better conditions.

It has been argued that the existence of private schools **undermines** the **principle** of **equality** of educational opportunity, because **social class backgrounds** rather than simple ability becomes the **key to success in education**. Not all children of the same ability have the same chance of paying for this route of educational success.

The quality of teaching in independent schools is **no better** than in state run comprehensives. However, their pupils may obtain better results because classes **tend to be smaller** than in the state sector, thus allowing more individual attention, and the schools often have **better resources and facilities**.

The opponents of private education argue that more money should be spent on improving the state system so everybody has the same chance.

Exercise Three

Look at the following statistics, which show how many children attend state and private schools.

1. What type of state or private sector school do not secondary pupils attend?
2. In which sector do the highest number of pupils attend?
3. According to the information given, what might be one advantage of attending an independent school?
4. Which trends do you find surprising?
5. What are the implications of these trends?

Class	1990 Thousands	1994/5	1995/6
Public Sector Schools			
Nursery	105	85	84
Primary	4995	5225	5335
Secondary			
Modern	94	90	79
Grammar	156	184	182
Comprehensive	2884	3093	3130
Other Secondary	300	289	280
All Public Sector Schools	8443	8996	9096
Independent Schools			
Pupils aged 10 and under	266	262	268
Pupils aged 11 and over	347	338	335
All Independent Schools	613	600	603

Source

Social Trends, 1997

Views on Education

Obviously the different ideological groups see independent education in a variety of ways. The following table taken from *Sociology in Focus* gives an idea of the different approaches.

State Vs Private Education
Exercise Four

Fit the following statements into the appropriate cell.

	Collectivist		Individualist	
	1	2	3	4
Policy for Education		Education freely available. Individuals may opt out using private schools at their own expense.	Mixed economy of education (combination of publicly and independently funded institutions).	
Possible role for independent sector?	None	Competes with public sector.	.	All schools are independent.
Extent of Parental Choice?	No parental Choice		Parental choice with some state provision to help with costs of independent sector.	Parental choice as full as possible - use of vouchers provided by state to pay for education.

1. State System only No opt out.
2. Complements public sector
3. Mixed economy of education (combination of publicly and independently funded institutions.
4. No publicly funded education. Free market, independent institutions.
5. Parental Choice but full cost of independent education met by personal finance.

Exercise Five

Look at the following statements do they support the idea of the continuation of the public school or reject the public school as a tenable institution. .

1. They help to form an elite that is not based on meritocratic principles.
2. In a free society people should have the choice where to send their children.
3. It is not fair that private schools do not pay taxes, they are seen as being 'charities' by the government.
4. The examination results of public schools tend to be very good.
5. The hallowed halls of these schools provide the breeding ground for racism, homophobia, sexism, and class orientated bigotry.
6. Public schools still offer the discerning (and wealthy) Sadists the chance to be 'servants for the big boys', and other dubious sexual practices.
7. For parents academic considerations were the most important in their choice of schooling.
8. The fact that so many of the people who run the education system send their children to private schools sends out mixed messages as to the efficiency of the system.
9. There is a strong link between going to a public school and obtaining the best jobs in the UK.
10. These schools are able to offer smaller classes, and better facilities, for those who desire the best for their children.
11. They contribute to the diversity of the British schooling system.
12. The middle class culture propagated in public schools leads to the 'false consciousness' that the middle and upper classes are in some way 'born to rule'.
13. Money spent propping up this old fashioned system would be better allocated to improving education for all.
14. Teaching in some of the public schools is no better than in some comprehensives. For example, some of the 'lesser public schools' charge high fees for only adequate GCSE and A level performance.
15. The splitting of the sexes cannot be a good thing for males for the best part of their formative years.
16. These schools are not constrained by the National Curriculum and thus can offer progressive schooling for those who can afford this.
17. Private schools allow children from ethnic backgrounds to be immersed in their cultural background and to ensure the continuation of their way of life.
18. If they were abolished, the rich and well connected would simply seek privileged education for their children outside of Britain and perhaps also take their expertise elsewhere.
19. They have contributed to the lack of social change in the UK. For example, whilst other progressive states have a Bill of Rights, and PR the UK does not.
20. The introduction of the Assisted Places Scheme perhaps implies tacit acceptance of their inegalitarian nature and effects.
21. Arguably there are an essential part of the heritage of the United Kingdom.
22. The Assisted Places scheme in reality merely subsidized middle-class attendance of public schools. Few if any working class parents knew how to access this cash.
23. The schools themselves produce middle class introverts who are unable to distance themselves from the ideology taught to them.
24. Neil Kinnock sees the public school system as 'not incidental to the class system, but the very cement in the walls that divides British society'.

25. The public school system is a barrier to the new entrepreneurial spirit, that must be tapped if Britain is to be strong economically.
26. So traumatized are some ex-public school boys that there are counseling facilities just for them!
27. It is not just the education that divides, the existence of high status, quaint uniforms, and traditional language and accents is amongst the most effective means of perpetually imposing class divisions.

Exercise Six

In a small group, read the following summaries of the main arguments for and against the independent sector;

1. Independent schooling maintains privilege based upon social class position; that is, the rich can only afford it. It is used by the rich to give their children a headstart. Education should be only be provided through a properly funded state system to ensure that everyone has access to the same levels and quality of education.
2. Independent schooling is similar to private health care in that people should be able to spend their money however, they choose. If they can afford to send their children to an independent school then, in a free society, this option should be available to them.

Use these summaries and other information in this handout to prepare a debate on one of the above. I shall get the upper sixth in to ask questions and act as an audience.

Effects of the Public School System

Two arguable effects of the public school system are discussed below; the role of the public school in the **development of an anti-industrial culture** in Britain and their **contribution to a culture of deference and parochialism in the rest of the population.**

The Weiner Thesis: The Public School and Anti-Industrialization

They Sent their Sons to be ‘Gentlemen’

Martin Weiner’s *English Culture and Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (1981) argues that aristocratic values and influence **prevented the development of a full-blooded industrial culture in Britain.** He states that the self-made industrial bourgeois sent their sons to the Victorian public schools not to learn to be industrialists **but to be gentlemen.**

Weiner does not find the same opposition **amongst the newly rich** to their offspring working in banking and finance in the City of London as to their working in industry. In this context,

Criticisms of Weiner

W. B. Rubinstein points out that the **financial bourgeoisie** was more **significant economically** and socially than the **industrial bourgeoisie** – before, after and during the industrial revolution. In this respect, he finds that the emphasis on the Weiner thesis is somewhat biased and argues that the elite preference for finance over industry has much **wider origins** than the snobbishness of the industrial bourgeoisie or the aristocratic obsessions of the public schools. Rubinstein’s historical interpretation of the place of industry in the national economy may be correct but it is also clear that public schools **contributed little to improving the long term relative weakness of Britain’s manufacturing industry.**

Elite Leadership and Popular Deference and Parochialism.

The argument discussed here is that the **Conservative culture** of the **British elite** is largely responsible for the creation of a **conservative national culture in England.** Weiner himself develops this analysis to the broad middle-classes in England and suggests that it could be **developed and extended** – with **modifications** – **to the working class.**

As far as the middle-class were concerned the effects of the public schools were that of **imitation.** Weiner, points out that although in the inter-war years only about one in twenty Englishmen passed through them, the public schools became.... *‘an archetypal national institution’.*

The children of the large majority of people did not go to grammar schools, however. After the Second World War, most of them went to a Secondary Modern School from which they progressed into manual or routine non-manual work. **Direct imitation of the upper and upper middle-classes** – was not an option to them. Nevertheless, they were and are **influenced by the dominant traditional and Conservative Upper Class Culture**. Two stands of response among the working class can be indicated here.

How the Working Class Imitated Them

Some Opposition but.....

This impresses the working classes. Some regard the upper middle class as **born to rule** and thus vote for them. Secondly, a larger proportion of the working class developed an authentically original class culture, which reacted self-defensively, **protectively against the upper classes**. Politically the main expression of this reaction was support for the **Labour Party** and **industrially support for the trade unions**.

Plenty of Acquiescence

However, despite the opposition, the dominant social and political culture in Britain has remained **Conservative**. In **contrast to the Scandinavian and several other Western European countries** in which the Labour movement and reforming middle-classes have produced a **progressive, modernizing culture**. Britain retains a **huge and expensive monarchy**, an **unrepresentative House of Lords**, is run to a great extent by a **privileged elite** generally opposed to the kind of participatory institutions the rest of Western Europe largely takes for granted. Ironically, the strongest recent challenge to Britain's traditional elite has come from the **free-market wing of the Conservative Party rather than from the left**. Under Margaret Thatcher, the free marketeers or New Right attempted to generate a new '*entrepreneurial culture*' to replace both 'labourism' and traditional elite/defence. However, although the Thatcherite reforms attacked both socialism and less systematically, certain citadels of ex-public school domination such as the higher reaches of the civil service. However, although the Thatcherite reforms may have **opened up Britain's traditional elite to some new talent**, particularly talent with business orientation, the signs are that Britain's traditional elite and traditionally conservative national culture remain intact.

Why Does this Old Boy Network Still Exist?

The continuing power and status of the ex-public school elite is not difficult to understand in that the institutional and **social links from boyhood to manhood are, quite obvious**. Less easy to explain is the ideological and hegemony of the ex-public school elite over much of the rest of the population. Two reasons for this can be offered.

Why Do We Swallow their Ideology?

First the Conservative Party has quite **effectively presented itself** as the party of 'one nation' as opposed to merely class-based party. Historically, the Conservatives have used the ideology of nation and empire to **appeal beyond the class boundaries**. Such an approach was notably successful when the Falklands war reversed Thatcher's declining fortunes and gained her an electoral landslide. **Nationalism** remains a potent force in English culture and politics and almost inevitably has the effect of **distancing the English from wider currents of European and global concern**. To that extent nationalism has a parochial, narrowing effect on English culture and society. And secondly, ex-public school; males are in a highly advantageous position to **present themselves as well-equipped and trained to lead**. Whether the image of 'natural leader' still carries much weight with the electorate is a moot point but surveys show that the Tories are generally regarded as economically more competent and stronger on law and order.

Sources

I acknowledge the use of the following resources.

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